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# Research Offers Tough Love to Improve Human Rights Practices

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# Research offers tough love to improve human rights practices

In human rights work, practicing the same habits does not guarantee improvement over time.



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JOEL R. PRUCE // September 20, 2017

**W**e know what it means to practice a skill such as juggling or dancing, but what does it mean to "practice" human rights?

Contributions to OpenGlobalRights (OGR), since its inception, have gravitated around critique of human rights practices by focusing on advocacy and activism, cultivating debates that address the contemporary dilemmas facing human rights movements worldwide. The launch of OGR four years ago is a symptom of what [I've referred to elsewhere](#) as a "practice turn" in the scholarly field of human rights—one that takes human rights practice as its subject, forges space for scholar-practitioner collaboration and communication, and focuses on strategies and tactics utilized to advance human rights norms.

Yet, considering the ubiquity of the term "human rights practice," conceptually it remains unexplored. As [other academic areas](#) have done recently, I propose an attempt to define what it means to practice human rights. Then, we (as scholars and practitioners) need to outline the social nature of human rights practice and, finally, suggest how the practice turn permits critical investigation of human rights in an effort to strengthen advocacy and improve outcomes.

We use many verbs to describe human rights acts: implement, enforce, comply, monitor, evaluate, assess, measure, protect, provide, defend, claim, uphold, struggle, advocate, exercise, enjoy, intervene, codify, institutionalize, and internalize, among others. Together, these terms sketch out the universe of human rights work, cobbled together to patch the cracks in the edifice of social life through which human welfare often slips. The practice of human rights is the active process by which these norms and ideas are brought to bear in the lives and experiences of human beings, and as a concept captures crucial qualities of the work that goes into making human rights a reality.

In order to determine the meaning and significance of "practice" in the context of human rights, perhaps a better analogy, rather than juggling or dancing, is the practice of medicine. For this sector, to practice is to participate in a structured set of activities and patterned behaviors, governed by rules, relating to a specific professionalized environment. By building on lessons learned and guided by advancements in science and technology, medicine develops frameworks of practice to appropriately respond to a broad range of emergency situations. Through training and with repetition, the practical

details are disseminated throughout the sector, as well as being reflexively shaped by those engaged in the practice itself. Practice research expands the appropriate terrain for exploring how human rights matter in society, culture, and politics. The human rights community is a central feature of this new terrain.

Human rights practices are deeply social, and we tacitly understand that. In our common parlance, we talk about a “human rights community” as if it’s something that exists. But what do we mean? In some sense, we think of a coherent group of actors held together by shared goals, identities, and values. Sometimes this means sharing resources and working together, but community members also compete with one another over scarce resources. The “community” moniker is self-applied in the human rights context, which also suggests that human rights actors want to believe they are working with others collectively.

Communities are also constituted by their shared practices and habits. Consider a community like “the medical community”, which develops knowledge on best practices to disseminate to members to improve overall outcomes. What makes the landscape of human rights hang together as a community is the convergence around practices engaged in by its constituents who believe themselves to be a part of that community. While not necessarily standing shoulder to shoulder at every moment, members of communities of practice remain bound by a common cause, a set of overlapping interests, and a base of tactical wisdom developed through generations of trial-and-error.

However, communities are not well known for critical self-reflection. Quite the contrary; communities are insular, naturally conservative, glacially evolving, myopic, and

defensive—and not predisposed to introspection. Cultivating critique of communities provokes elites and members to lash out, ostracize, rally around the center; which is why it is so often from the fringes and margins of communities that calls for reform are first heard.

Social practice research places the activities of the human rights movement under a microscope, where the work is done in all its gloriously mundane detail. These efforts often occur in discourse, communication, translation, mediation, education, conversation, and interpretation. Social practice, in these terms, does not take place in front of a judge, in a legislature, or from behind a podium. The social practice of human rights is a people’s perspective on the methods and tools we’ve constructed for building power from below. But human rights is no longer merely a movement from below, suggesting a final, crucial component of the practice turn: the imperative for critique commensurate with the status of human rights advocacy.

The social practice of human rights captures the overlap of work at the intersection of research and advocacy. Conducting research in this area permits academics to descend from their ivory towers and get their hands dirty in the practical world, practicing what we preach and participating as engaged partners and part of a broadly conceived human rights community. For practitioners, mired in the hustle of work, academics may provide distance and perspective, applying their training in method and inquiry to taken-for-granted habits and practices. In this sense, scholar–practitioner cooperation is increasingly common as centers and institutes conduct research with a normative slant geared toward making demonstrable change.

Human rights work may often feel like juggling and dancing, or juggling while

dancing, but practicing the same habits does not guarantee that they improve over time. Practice does not make perfect; practice makes permanent. Scholars working within the social practice paradigm may play a role by exposing the human rights community to greater scrutiny by peeking behind the curtain and letting in some light. By building collaborative relationships, researchers can become trustworthy critics and an essential source of tough love. In order to shake the human rights community from its complacency, to break it free from stagnant routines and tired rehearsals—to build a dynamic human rights community—it is beholden upon us to critique its practices and contribute in a meaningful way to move human rights protection forward.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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